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# The Black Sea Region in Modern Russian-Turkish Cooperation: Geo-Strategic Aspect

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### ABSTRACT

The article builds on analyses of the Post-Soviet trend of Russian-Turkish relations in the Black Sea region while focusing on the features of transnational cooperation in the modern geo-strategic context. The Black Sea region is found to be a priority area of cooperative ties between Russia and Turkey. Revival of Russian presence in this macro-region leads to an increase of the meridional connectivity of this trans-regional space. It is concluded that during the March events of 2014 the deeper mutual unconformity took place between the spheres of Russian geo-strategic interests and the Black Sea segment of the so-called “Turkish World” (i.e., Turk Dunyasi). It is shown that the abandonment of the “South stream” gas project in favor of the “Turkish route” has significantly increased the meridional communication in the Black Sea region. This brings to importance the development of the Russian-Turkish Black Sea coast being as a special geo-economic concept. The gas transportation system is to become its cornerstone with the Istanbul megametropolis being the biggest settlement center of this transnational system.

**Keywords:** Black Sea Region, Russia, Turkey, Transnational Cooperation, Geopolitics, Geoeconomics

**JEL Classifications:** F41, F5, R1

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the scientific literature is placing noticeable emphasizes on the role of marine areas in ensuring the cross-border linkages (Asheim and Isaksen, 2002; Beneito, 2006; Doloreux, 2006; Doloreux and Melançon, 2008). Attention is drawn to the general shift of economic activity and population towards the coastal regions (Small and Nicholls, 2003; Green, 2009; Zitti et al., 2015). Sea and coastal areas, their resource potential in particular, is turning into an increasingly significant global economic and geopolitical factor.

In the modern geo-strategic context the Black Sea region becomes the area of increasing priority, as it is one of the most important Eurasian crossroads and a traditionally important as well as sensitive to bilateral relations habitat for the Russian-Turkish cooperation. For the Russian Federation and the Republic of

Turkey, the Black Sea region is more than a natural communication corridor. It can be considered as the most important component of an extensive joint geo-historical heritage of the two countries (Druzhinin et al., 2013). It is also the most geographically, historically, mentally proximate area where the current Russian and Turkish geostrategic interests overlap.

The geopolitical and geo-economic situation in this region is increasingly dependent on the Russian-Turkish dialogue resulting from a complex, spontaneously evolving Eurasian context. According to Ferit (2014), these transnational relations are occasionally under some turbulence, but in the last quarter of the century, there seemed to be observed a positive upward trend. Since the early 1990s, Turkey plays increasingly active and important role in the Eurasian geopolitical and geo-economic structure. It seems to be not only one of the priority Russia’s partners in Eurasia, but also its strategic ally, rival, and a hypothetical “alternate.”

## 2. THE RUSSIAN-TURKISH GEO-ECONOMIC AND GEOPOLITICAL CONVERGENCE

The intensity and the tone of the Russian-Turkish dialogue in recent years has been consistently influenced by:

- “Historical track” of the bilateral political and economic cooperation; commitment to previously allied unions with third countries and their associations.
- Pragmatic external economic interests.
- The extent and effectiveness of both native Eurasian geopolitical and geo-economic activity, and similar actions of the counterpart.
- Balance of political forces in each country, the possibility of exposure to it by using the external events and their images.
- Global and Eurasian geopolitical and geo-economic architectonics, the presence of common threats and challenges, as well as the degree of solidarity with the opinion and behavior of the dominant geopolitical actors.

Characteristically, it was the collapse of the USSR and the ensuing short period of greatest geostrategic passivity and weaknesses of Russia to be clearly perceived by Turkish researchers as a significant factor of transition from the busy nature of relations between Russia and Turkey (Muzaffer, 2010) to a “friendly and warm” relations (Ayhan, 1999). Under the agreement dated May 25, 1992, Russia and Turkey have declared each other as “friendly countries;” the same year an agreement on Black Sea economic cooperation was signed, which was initiated earlier, in 1990, by the Turkish President. Russian shuttle business began to develop at this background. It can be viewed as the actual forerunner of the later 2000s “explosive” expansion of bilateral trade relations, which also accelerated the diffusion of previously existed pre-emptive barrier of the Black Sea geo-political boundaries. In parallel, the “Eurasian vector” of Turkey’s interests performed clear. In 1992, the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency was organized under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It was followed by the establishment of the International Organization of Turkic Culture (TÜRKSÖY), aimed at dissemination of the Latin alphabet and the Turkish language in Turkic regions - the dominant ethno-linguistic component, and States Turkish schools. The first Turkic summit was held in Turkey in October 1992, which was attended by the heads of all Turkic republics. In the same period, the channel “TRT Eurasia” was created. What’s more, a Turkish Eximbank was founded with the purpose to provide investments in this macro-region, and Turkish Airlines started regular flights to Azerbaijan and the capital of the Central Asian Turkic republics. Characteristically, many Western States, especially the USA, explicitly or implicitly supported these initiatives of Turkey, as they fully correspond with the strategic guidelines for the re-establishment of Soviet geopolitical heritage that was declared later on in the second half of the 1990s and the early 2000s.

The second half of the 1990s, has appeared to be a cooling period in Turkish-Russian relations, which seemed to be not only the result of the Turkey’s actions of 1994-1998, the changes in national regulations of navigation in the straits, or

the Russian trend to defend its positions and interests in the North Caucasus, but also the important circumstances related to the efforts of the Turkish Republic to provide expansion and construction of the “Turkic world from the Adriatic to the great wall of China” (e.g., see Muzaffer, 2010). The actual “invasion” (the term used by Yazkova (2009) - the prominent expert on Mediterranean-Black Sea themes, for the assessment of the external geopolitical forces of the United States and the European Union) took place in the Black Sea-Caspian geopolitical space and beyond. It caused the situation in which “the Eurasian vector” of geopolitics of the southern neighbor of Russia noticeably lost its attractiveness for the most of the post-Soviet Turkic States and has departed in their foreign policy agenda to the “second plan.” On the contrary, Russia, acquiring the status of one of the leading global energy exporters and becoming attractive to migrants, has increased the potential economic (and therefore political, cultural) cooperation with neighbor countries, including the Turkish Republic.

On the one hand, against the background of tangible demographic growth, the Turkish Republic has demonstrated an enviable economic development (second after China among Eurasian “power centers”). Only for the last 8 years, the population of Turkey has increased by 10 million or 14.3 %; its total demographic potential increased from 12.5 to 76 million people, i.e., six times since the inception of the Turkish Republic in 1923. Since 2000, the average annual positive dynamics of Turkey’s GDP was 4.8 % (based on author’s estimates). It must be emphasized that in recent years the population growth - as forecasted by the Turkish Statistics Institute, has supported the growth of income and effective demand, which creates significant endogenous foundation for sustainable socio-economic development, expansion of Turkey’s economic ties, its increasingly confident positioning as a de facto major regional power center<sup>1</sup>.

On the other hand, the geo-economic growth of Turkey’s influence from the middle of the 2000s was accompanied by “de-westernization” of its foreign economic relations, increasing the change of its orientation from traditional markets of the Euro-Atlantic countries to the East, North and South, gaining thereby obvious Eurasian development vector. For example, while in 2004 the total shares of Germany, the UK, France, Italy, Spain, Holland and the USA in Turkish exports accounted for 51%, in 2013 this figure was only 33%. Similarly, the dependence of the Turkish economy on the Western countries’ import decreased. In 2012, the traditional economic and geopolitical partner of the Turkish Republic - Germany, has passed its leading position in exports to China, which eventually became the second (after Russia) supplier of goods to Turkish markets.

New geo-economic trends predetermined increasing dependence of the Turkish Republic on the scale and nature of interaction with the Russian Federation and other significant exporters of energy resources, strengthened by the partial “reislamization” of Turkey. The protracted pause that lasted for many decades in the process

<sup>1</sup> Based on the Turkish Statistics Institute data, the population of the Republic will vary in the range from 94 to 110 million people by mid-century.

of the acceptance of Turkey into the EU<sup>2</sup> has created a favorable environment for symptomatic, significant progress in public consciousness. According to the Center for European studies of the Boğaziçi University, in 2003, the number of Turkish citizens positively related to Turkey's accession into the EU amounted to 69.3%, while in 2012 this figure had dropped to 47.1%. Thus, the number of persons negatively related to the idea of Turkey joining the EU is growing each year. At the same time fewer and fewer of the Turkish respondents perceive their country as part of Europe: In 2003, 70% of respondents believed Turkey to be geographical part of Europe, to the present time this figure has fallen to 46% (Druzhinin et al., 2013). Thus, it can be perceived as a matter-of-course that in the spring of 2011 Turkey has applied for membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and in 2012 received the status of "dialogue partner" in this organization. The idea of integration into the Eurasian processes, awareness of the increasing values of the "Eurasian vector" in the politics of the country, as well as in the selection of geo-economic and geopolitical orientations, attunement of "Eurasianism" to national interests, becomes increasingly popular in the Turkish Republic (Ferit, 2014). The consideration of the Turks and the Russians as a "sister community" with a common Eurasian identity also takes place.

In the context of the above-mentioned geopolitical and geo-economic transformations, since the turn of the third Millennium the constructive policy language and the elements of trust entered into the Russian-Turkish bilateral relations (Göktürk, 2013), supported by high dynamics of escalating foreign trade relations. The volume of Turkish exports to Russia had been increasing right until the global crisis of 2008. The year 2008 was the culmination in the growth of the value of Russian exports to Turkey, in particular, providing two-thirds of its needs for natural gas by Russian supplies. On this basis, the structure of the strategic cooperation between Russia and Turkey became clearly visible, mainly covering such sectors as trade, tourism and energy. The interactions of the two countries in the black sea region has played a significant role in such strategic cooperation. It is not the will of case that the Russian-Turkish geo-economic (partly geopolitical) convergence, and the pause in the progressive dynamics of interstate relations that appeared since 2010, almost chronologically correlated with the gradual but consistent return of Russia into the Black Sea region. As noted by Busygina (2011), in the first post-Soviet decade, this macro-region has stayed on the periphery of the foreign policy of the Russian Federation.

From the late 1990s to the early 2000s the dramatic increase in the volume of Russian supply at the world energy market, exports of metal, grain, and sunflower in the black sea (in parallel to increase of import dependence) there were implemented major investment projects such as Caspian Pipeline Consortium, the "Blue stream," reconstruction of the Novorossiysk sea port and a number of others. While by the mid-1990s, the cargo turnover of Novorossiysk seaport, which is the dominant in scale in not only the South of Russia but also nationwide, was only slightly more than 52 million

tons, by 2012 it reached 159 million tones. There are about 30% of total Russian exports of oil and petroleum products that come through the port terminals of the South of Russia at the present time. The national effort is to make the coastal South-Western borders not only a major transport and logistics complexes, but to form a "Black Sea arc of advanced development"- support of Foreign Direct Investment and holding of the XXII Olympic winter games in Sochi<sup>3</sup> (Druzhinin, 2014).

Finally, the Black Sea region has not only gained the transport, logistics and communication value for the modern Russia, but became one of the few real poles of population and socio-economic growth, increasingly asserting itself as an integral part of the national geographical, historical, economic, cultural and sacred space within the process of transition to a "post-secular society" (Habermas, 2011). The return of the Crimea into the Russian jurisdiction not only significantly changed the situation in the Black Sea, but also exposed the general fundamental progress in Eurasian and global geopolitical architectonics.

The modern Russian Black Sea coast, which is geographically expanded and supported by the government through the financial, infrastructural and military support, has objectively "wedged" into the Euro-Atlantic Black Sea region, being considered by the strategists of the West as the increasingly "acquired" part of the Eurasian space, the link between the EU and the "Greater Middle East" (Aliboni, 2006). It caused, in turn, the further geopolitical fragmentation of the macro-region, causing the formation of new barriers, "fault lines" and output of several alternative geo-concepts of the Black Sea. In addition, it has significantly reduced the effectiveness of the interstate formats of the Black Sea Cooperation (e.g., the BSEC, the "Black Sea Synergy," etc.) formed in the previous two decades. Furthermore, the Ukrainian crisis marked the appearance of another major focus of military-political confrontation in the Black Sea region that has previously been in the state of "inherent instability" (Yazkova, 2011). Finally, during the March events of 2014 the deeper mutual unconformity took place between the spheres of Russian geo-strategic interests and the Black Sea segment of the so-called "Turkish World" (Turk Dunyasi).

### 3. DISCUSSION

Tarakji (2012, p27), a Professor at Izmir University of Pampering, argues that "Turkish foreign policy is now defined only by national interests." Seeking to establish itself as a regional power, a transit country and a mediator, wishing to retain the new positive dynamics of foreign trade interactions with the Russian Federation<sup>4</sup>, Ankara has not aligned itself with the policies of the West even in the situation of the Ukrainian crisis, refusing to enter the sanctions policy. Against this background, there are replicated judgment in the publications of some Turkish researchers, which

2 Since 1963 Turkey became an associate member; in 1987 - has filed a formal application for membership; 1999 - was included in the list of candidates for membership in the European Union.

3 The "Olympic project" has been able to double the annual volume of investments in fixed capital in the Krasnodar region; during the 5-year period of the project the population of Sochi steadily increased on average by 2% per year.

4 Each year since 2009, the Turkey's export volume to Russia has been increasing steadily, exceeding pre-crisis level.

contain the thesis that the strengthening of Russia is “historically unprofitable for Turkey” (Ayhan, 1999), and the activity of Russia does not leave any “space in the whole of Eurasia” for the Republic of Turkey (Göktürk, 2013), and “The search for union-axis between Turkey and Russia [...] obviously would drown in the deep waters of the Black Sea” (Mehmet, 2014, p5). However, as it was convincingly demonstrated in early December 2014 by the State visit of the President of the Russian Federation to Ankara, Turkish-Russian geostrategic linkages have acquired a substantial safety margin, while Turkey has the desire and a political will to make productive use of its geo-economic interests within the new geopolitical situation.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The abandonment of the “South stream” construction in favor of the “Turkish route” for Russian natural gas transportation has significantly increased the meridional communication in the Black Sea space and brings to importance the development of the Russian-Turkish Black Sea coast. The gas transportation system is to become its key infrastructural element of these relations, while the biggest settlement centers are to become the economic-urban dominants of the coastal area. In particular, the transnational maritime growth poles are the Istanbul mega metropolis together with other territories of the Sea of Marmara region containing 23 million inhabitants and concentrating 45% of Turkey’s GRP, and its trans-equatorial counterweight - the Russian Black Sea - Azov group of settlement systems (e.g., Rostov, Krasnodar-Novorossiysk and Simferopol-Sevastopol-Yalta, Sochi) with aggregate demographic potential of up to 6.5 million people. In fact, there are important preconditions for the subsequent formation of the cross-border and trans-equatorial macro-region that is complex in structure and spatial configuration, asymmetric in its economic and demographic potential of individual components. This macro-region in the full sense could be called Eurasian, since it provides the further reinforcing of the historical significance of the Black Sea as one of the most important and complex spatial projections of relations between Russia and Turkey.

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